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# American Equality and Foreign Revolutions

David Brion Davis

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As we pass through this age of bicentennials, historians resist becoming eulogists. Like biblical prophets, we tend to scorn self-congratulation and to point to the succession of national failings that may ultimately exhaust the patience of that retributive deity who determines the rise and fall of Great Powers. From this forum my distinguished predecessors, Leon F. Litwack and Stanley N. Katz, eloquently exposed the hollowness of American pretensions to equality and social justice. Two years ago Professor Litwack reminded us that "the history of black America is not the history of a chosen people conquering the wilderness, extending democratic institutions, and progressing toward a more perfect union." Last year Professor Katz showed how American lawmakers and judges had caged and tamed "the more radical implications of American revolutionary political ideology" until the Warren court finally began to infuse "political and social substance into constitutional equality," an achievement that is proving to be fragile and at least partly reversible.<sup>1</sup>

From this perspective it is tempting to invoke a radical but pessimistic version of America's messianic mission in order to explain why the "cause" of the American Revolution, to borrow Thomas Paine's hopeful phrase in *Common Sense*, failed to become "the cause of all mankind." In 1790 the first president of the United States ceremoniously received the key to the fallen Bastille as the "early trophy," in Paine's words, "of the Spoils of Despotism and the first ripe fruits of American principles transplanted into Europe."<sup>2</sup> Yet in our own time the United States has often been

This essay is a slightly revised version of the presidential address of the Organization of American Historians delivered at St. Louis on April 7, 1989. It has been expanded into a short book, *Revolutions: Reflections on American Equality and Foreign Liberations*, which will be published in 1990 by Harvard University Press. David Brion Davis is Sterling Professor of History at Yale University.

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<sup>1</sup> Leon F. Litwack, "Trouble in Mind: The Bicentennial and the Afro-American Experience," *Journal of American History*, 74 (Sept. 1987), 317; Stanley N. Katz, "The Strange Birth and Unlikely History of Constitutional Equality," *ibid.*, 75 (Dec. 1988), 752, 759.

<sup>2</sup> Julian P. Boyd, ed., *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson* (22 vols., Princeton, 1950- ), XVI, 531-32n. The Marquis de Lafayette, who offered the "main key" and a picture of the Bastille to George Washington "as a son to my adoptive father, as an aid de camp to my General, as a Missionary of Liberty to its Patriarch," entrusted them to the care of Thomas Paine, who was traveling from Paris to London. The key was presented to the president in August 1790. Both Lafayette and Paine encouraged the idea that the French Revolution was an extension of the American Revolution. Thus Paine dedicated *The Rights of Man*, his vindication of the French Revolution from the aspersions

the world's leading adversary of popular revolutions, the neo-Metternichian supporter of such reactionary leaders as Fulgencio Batista y Zaldívar of Cuba, Ferdinand Marcos of the Philippines, Mohammed Riza Pahlavi of Iran, Ngo Dinh Diem of South Vietnam, Anastasio Somoza Debayle of Nicaragua, François Duvalier of Haiti, and Augusto Pinochet Ugarte of Chile. Did this apostasy begin with the nightmares of mid-nineteenth-century capitalists alarmed by news of European anarchists, Communists, and the June Days of 1848? Or were Americans in their national infancy permanently traumatized by the all-too-egalitarian Terror of the French Revolution, 85 percent of whose victims were commoners? Or are we to conclude that the American War of Independence was not a revolution at all, that its rhetoric simply legitimized trends long under way and freed slaveholding planters and a mercantile elite from the constraints of imperial authority?<sup>3</sup>

I think the time has come for American historians to transcend the nationalistic tradition that presupposes both messianic mission and apostasy, a tradition that contributed to the left- and right-wing distortions of the long Cold War era. If recent history has dramatically exposed the shams of Communist ideology, it has also exposed the hypocrisy behind the claims that corporate capitalism will democratize the world. In 1979, after a period of disillusion over the supposedly democratizing effects of "modernization," most liberal-minded Americans either cheered or sighed with relief when the Ayatollah Khomeini flew from Paris to Tehran. Few Westerners suspected, as Bernard Lewis has pointed out, that for modern Islamic rebels neither the French nor the Russian revolution "provide[s] usable models or evocative symbols."<sup>4</sup>

The meaning of revolution becomes increasingly ambiguous when the Soviet Union cautiously experiments with freedom of expression and begins to reevaluate its own revolutionary history, including the appalling crimes of Stalinism; when the voters of Poland, given the first chance in over forty years to express their views in parliamentary elections, overwhelmingly repudiate the Communist government that rules in their name; and when hundreds of thousands of Chinese students and workers, defying martial law to demand democracy and an end to governmental corruption and authoritarian control, are gunned down by soldiers of the People's Liberation Army. Nothing could be more fatuous than to interpret the "June Days" of 1989 as the confirmation and triumph of America's Cold War ideology or as a prelude to the Americanization of the world. If the history of the past two centuries

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of Edmund Burke, to Washington. See Thomas Paine, *The Rights of Man* (London, 1791-1792); and David Freeman Hawke, *Paine* (New York, 1974), 223-24.

<sup>3</sup> Robert Darnton, "What Was Revolutionary about the French Revolution?" *New York Review of Books*, Jan. 19, 1989, p. 6; Donald Greer, *The Incidence of the Terror during the French Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass., 1935), 154-66. For highly critical surveys of American responses to foreign revolutions, see Michael H. Hunt, *Ideology and U.S. Foreign Policy* (New Haven, 1987), 92-124; and William Appleman Williams, *America Confronts a Revolutionary World, 1776-1976* (New York, 1976). More nuanced in its treatment of complex motivations and contradictions is Lloyd C. Gardner, *Safe for Democracy: The Anglo-American Response to Revolution, 1913-1923* (New York, 1984).

<sup>4</sup> Bernard Lewis, "Islamic Revolutions," *New York Review of Books*, Jan. 21, 1988, pp. 46-50, esp. 46; "Islamic Revolution: An Exchange," *ibid.*, April 28, 1988, pp. 58-60.

has taught us no other lesson, it should have taught us that no one—not the marquis de Condorcet, not Karl Marx, not Adolph Hitler, not Henry R. Luce, not Mao Zedong nor Ronald Reagan—knows where history is headed. But as Communist nations turn to market incentives and as their citizens reveal a deep-seated longing for political and legal rights we have long defended as a legacy of the American Revolution, we can see the absurdity of the recently fashionable view that for two centuries the United States has been struggling to preserve a sclerotic Present and fight off the Future, as represented by a regenerative, revolutionary world.<sup>5</sup>

If we are to move beyond messianic typologies, we will need to give more attention to the way revolutions have been compared, differentiated, acclaimed, denounced, and understood by different factions and classes—to the place and role revolutions have been assigned in what Michael Kammen calls the historical imagination.<sup>6</sup> We need to know how unexpected eruptions of violence and seeming chaos were made intelligible, how they were interpreted as meaningful events in some broad historical process or epic contest between good and evil. From this standpoint the astonishing American enthusiasm for the French Revolution, which persisted well after the Reign of Terror, casts doubt on the alleged conservatism of the American Revolution and provides insight into changing paradigms of equality and changing interpretations of the sources of evil.

In January 1794, about two weeks before the French National Convention abolished slavery in the French colonies and extended the rights of citizenship to all men regardless of color, the Massachusetts Constitution Society proclaimed that the French people were struggling to destroy aristocracy and vindicate the "*Equal Rights of Men*." According to these Boston Republicans, the present form and methods of the French government were matters of little concern, since "on the accomplishment of the great objects of their Revolution, depends not only the future happiness and prosperity of Frenchmen, but in our opinion of the *whole World of Mankind*." Democratic-Republican political societies issued similar declarations from Federalist New England to Charleston, South Carolina. The Republican Society in Charleston even sent a petition for membership to the Jacobin Club at Paris, which adopted the South Carolinians after a short debate.<sup>7</sup>

During the years of the French Revolution, Americans profited from the world's freest and most fully developed press, which at this period devoted more space to

<sup>5</sup> See especially Williams, *America Confronts a Revolutionary World*.

<sup>6</sup> Michael Kammen, *A Season of Youth: The American Revolution and the Historical Imagination* (New York, 1978).

<sup>7</sup> *Décret de la convention nationale, du 16. jour de pluviôse, an second de la République Française, une & indivisible, qui abolit l'esclavage des nègres dans les colonies*, in *La révolution française et l'abolition de l'esclavage: Texts et documents* (12 vols., Paris, n.d.), XII, no. 8; Charles Downer Hazen, *Contemporary American Opinion of the French Revolution* (Baltimore, 1897), 194, 195–96; Donald H. Stewart, *The Opposition Press of the Federalist Period* (Albany, 1969), 115–75; Alfred F. Young, *The Democratic Republicans of New York: The Origins, 1763–1797* (Chapel Hill, 1967), 349–428; Eugene Perry Link, *Democratic-Republican Societies, 1790–1800* (New York, 1942), 44–70, 129, 180–83; Paul Goodman, *The Democratic-Republicans of Massachusetts: Politics in a Young Republic* (Cambridge, Mass., 1964), 52–96. The anti-Federalist political clubs called themselves "Republicans" or "Democratic-Republicans" without much consistency.

foreign than to domestic news. The first reports of the fall of the Bastille appeared in American newspapers in mid-September; by late October many papers were printing and applauding the Declaration of the Rights of Man adopted on August 27, 1789. Democratic-Republican newspapers, such as the *New York Journal*, warned the public that most of the news about events from France came by way of England: "Our information comes from such a polluted source, that the small portion of truth, which is told, is so distorted and disguised as to become falsehood."<sup>8</sup> For the first five years of the Revolution, according to Gary B. Nash, the printed sermons of the American clergy gave virtually unanimous support to the revolutionary cause. Even Jedidiah Morse, the New England Calvinist who would lead the francophobic crusade in the late 1790s, called the French cause "unquestionably good" in a Thanksgiving Day sermon of 1794 that offered excuses and optimistic explanations for the massacres, "the rejection of the Christian Religion," and other "errors and irregularities" that would cease once France had defeated her external enemies.<sup>9</sup>

Such ardent public support of the French Revolution, long encouraged by prominent merchants, entrepreneurs, slaveholding planters, religious leaders, and state and city officials, seemed to be little affected by the National Convention's appropriation of centralized and unchecked political power; by the execution of a king who had once been toasted and celebrated as America's savior; by the abolition of Christianity and the worship of God; by the massacre of hundreds of thousands of peasant men, women, and children in the Vendée, Loire-Inférieure, and Maine-et-Loire; or by the Reign of Terror, which, although diminished by historians accustomed to twentieth-century standards of slaughter, took almost twice as many lives as the United States lost in all the battles of the War of Independence and the War of 1812 combined.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Beatrice F. Hyslop, "American Press Reports of the French Revolution, 1789-1794," *New-York Historical Society Quarterly*, 42 (1958), 329-30, 333-36, 345-46, esp. 346. As Hyslop notes, in Europe only Holland may have had a more fully developed press than did the United States. But the geographic scale was altogether different. In 1791 news coverage of American domestic politics temporarily outweighed foreign news, but the latter took precedence during most of the French Revolution and Vendean civil war.

<sup>9</sup> Gary B. Nash, "The American Clergy and the French Revolution," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 22 (July 1965), 393. In a cabinet paper of April 1793 to President Washington, even Alexander Hamilton used extremely cautious language to question the justice of Louis XVI's execution, noting that his view differed from that of "a numerous and respectable part, if not . . . a majority, of the people of the United States." Richard B. Morris, ed., *Alexander Hamilton and the Founding of the Nation* (New York, 1957), 404-5. Although some Federalist leaders and newspapers condemned the beheading of Louis XVI and subsequent mass executions, many Americans accepted the violence as the unfortunate cost of liberty and self-defense. Hazen, *Contemporary American Opinion of the French Revolution*, 253-63; Hyslop, "American Press Reports of the French Revolution," 340-45.

<sup>10</sup> In the Vendean war, which "began as a spontaneous revolt against compulsory military service," soldiers of the French republican army brutally killed a significant proportion of the peasant population in the *Vendée militaire* region, although there is still dispute over the number of victims and their connections with royalists and France's enemies, a politicized controversy that has been reignited by the bicentennial of the French Revolution. See Greer, *Incidence of the Terror*, 60-69, 131-66, esp. 61; Simon Schama, *Citizens: A Chronicle of the French Revolution* (New York, 1989), 791-92; Jean-François Fayard, *La justice révolutionnaire: Chronique de la Terreur* (Paris, 1987), 12-13, 265-70. The French executed approximately 17,000 in the Reign of Terror; American armed forces suffered roughly 9,000 battle deaths in the War of Independence and the War of 1812. Greer, *Incidence of the Terror*, 143; Darnton, "What Was Revolutionary about the French Revolution?" 6; Howard H. Peckham, *The Toll of Independence: Engagements and Battle Casualties of the American Revolution* (Chicago, 1974), 130; *Information Please Almanac: Atlas and Yearbook*, 1989 (Boston, 1989), 313.

John Adams, who had once called for the eradication of all artificial social distinctions and had hoped that "this many-headed beast, the people, will . . . have wit enough to throw their riders . . . [and] put an end to an abundance of tricks with which they are now curbed and bitted, whipped and spurred," later took pride in having been the only American statesman to see from the beginning that the French Revolution was not a "minister of grace" but a "goblin damned." But why had Adams been so exceptional? We rightly think of Jefferson as one of the French Revolution's most fervent and uncompromising supporters. Yet before the outbreak of the revolution he showed scant faith in French proposals for radical political change. Late in 1788, when Jefferson had just read the *Federalist Essays* in Paris and had congratulated James Madison for "the best commentary on the principles of government which ever was written," elucidating a plan that essentially needed only a bill of rights, he confided that the French people were unfortunately "not yet ripe for receiving the blessings to which they are entitled." One may note parenthetically that Marx later delivered similar judgments regarding other backward peoples. Stressing the need for gradual and cautious progress toward liberty, Jefferson even doubted "whether the body of the nation, if they could be consulted, would accept a Habeas corpus law, if offered them by the king." Jefferson needed no instruction regarding what Adams called the "mutinous rabble of Paris" or the fact that "bodies of men as well as individuals," as he himself had written in *A Summary View of the Rights of British America* in 1774, "are susceptible of the spirit of tyranny."<sup>11</sup>

In view of American leaders' fears of tyranny and of the corruptions of power, one would expect considerable skepticism over the French rejection of checks and balances and creation of a single, omnipotent Assembly. Drawing in part on classical republican and English Commonwealth traditions, America's constitution makers had insisted on maintaining a protective wall between the sovereign people and the fallible representatives who governed in their name. Powers that could not be conferred on individuals, such as control over the freedom to worship, could not be delegated to a government. Even the most radical state constitutions reserved various powers to the people and provided safeguards against legislative usurpation.<sup>12</sup> One result of such caution was to protect property and existing privilege and thus to limit the scope of social reform. All this said, there seems to be a striking disparity between our picture of the United States in the 1780s—a picture that includes repeated complaints over excessive democracy, the fearful reaction against Shays's Rebellion, the Constitutional Convention, the *Federalist Essays*, and the insistence on the protective Bill of Rights—and the ecstatic American response to the French Revolution. Why did the Revolution evoke such widespread enthusiasm and so little alarm until its most violent, radical phase had receded into the past?

<sup>11</sup> Edward Handler, *America and Europe in the Political Thought of John Adams* (Cambridge, Mass., 1964), 97–98; John Adams to Thomas Jefferson, June 30, July 13, July 15, 1813, in *The Adams-Jefferson Letters*, ed. Lester J. Cappon (2 vols., Chapel Hill, 1959), II, 346–48, 355–57; Kenneth R. Bowling and Helen E. Veit, eds., *The Diary of William Maclay and Other Notes on Senate Debates* (Baltimore, 1988), 153, 254; Jefferson to James Madison, Nov. 18, 1788, in *Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, ed. Boyd, XIV, 188; *ibid.*, I, 124.

<sup>12</sup> Gordon S. Wood, *The Creation of the American Republic, 1776–1787* (Chapel Hill, 1969), 271–73.

That question deserves more extensive study. With a few exceptions, historians have not correlated the chronology of the French Revolution with anti-Jacobin statements in the Federalist press, most of which appeared several years after such ghastly events as the September Massacres of 1792. Some Federalists, including New England clergymen, remained sympathetic to the French cause until conflicts over Jay's Treaty and French provocations finally forced a basic shift in perception.<sup>13</sup> Much attention has been given, of course, to the party warfare ignited by Alexander Hamilton's economic program and pro-English foreign policy; to the angry public demonstrations in 1795 protesting the ratification of Jay's Treaty; and to the Federalists' attempts to suppress dissent, exemplified in the Alien and Sedition Acts and in hysterical sermons warning that American society had become infested by 1798 with the dupes or conscious agents of an atheistic French conspiracy to destroy religion, justice, and free government.

But before this reaction took hold, the American people's ardent sense of fraternity with the French went beyond a partisan fear that the Hamiltonians were plotting to anglicize and subvert the Republic. No doubt such fear of creeping monarchism and corrupting fiscal power provided a cognitive framework for interpreting the French Revolution.<sup>14</sup> Yet if Hamilton's opponents had been wholly concerned with the dangers of tyrannical power, centralized government, and large standing armies, why would they risk linking their political fortunes with the French Convention and Directory? It is worth noting that the French Assembly probably had good reasons in 1792 for granting Hamilton honorary French citizenship, a privilege denied the better-known Jefferson, whose economic and political views, R. R. Palmer contends, were in some ways less revolutionary than Hamilton's.<sup>15</sup> In this respect it is significant that a patriotic desire to suppress the Whiskey Rebellion of 1794 could also swing sentiment behind French efforts to crush the much larger and more violent rebellion in the Vendée. As Beatrice F. Hyslop writes:

Even newspapers whose original sympathies had been with the opponents of the liquor excise now ranged themselves, in their reports on the Whiskey Rebellion in Pennsylvania, on the side of the Federal government. This same attitude was manifested in the American papers toward the Vendéan rebels: Law and the central government of France must be upheld. This may be, in part at least, why Robespierre's public utterances were treated so respectfully in the American press.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Ruth H. Bloch, *Visionary Republic: Millennial Themes in American Thought, 1756-1800* (Cambridge, Eng., 1985), 153-62, 202-7; Ruth H. Bloch, "The Social and Political Base of Millennial Literature in Late Eighteenth-Century America," *American Quarterly*, 40 (Sept. 1988), 378-96; Lance Banning, *The Jeffersonian Persuasion: Evolution of a Party Ideology* (Ithaca, 1978), 238-52; Young, *Democratic Republicans*, 366-467.

<sup>14</sup> See esp. Banning, *Jeffersonian Persuasion*; Joseph Charles, *The Origins of the American Party System* (New York, 1961); Drew R. McCoy, *The Elusive Republic: Political Economy in Jeffersonian America* (Chapel Hill, 1980).

<sup>15</sup> R. R. Palmer, *The Age of the Democratic Revolution: A Political History of Europe and America, 1760-1800: The Struggle* (Princeton, 1964), 55, 522-25. Before Paine became involved in the French Revolution, he was an ally of the banker Robert Morris and a defender of the Bank of North America against those he termed "the hot-headed Whigs." Hawke, *Paine*, 149-59.

<sup>16</sup> Hyslop, "American Press Reports of the French Revolution," 341-44, esp. 344. Britain's entry into the war against France in 1793 nourished anti-British feeling, since the French opened their colonial and Continental ports to American commerce and the British retaliated by sinking hundreds of American ships.

In pondering such anomalies, it is important to recapture the French Revolution's radical unpredictability. When we look backward, as historians must do, it is difficult to overcome the illusion of an inevitable and predictable sequence of events. Because of the Franco-American alliance of 1778, which opened the way for both American independence and the financial crisis that led to the French Revolution, the French political terrain was closely scrutinized by some of the most astute minds America has ever produced. Yet Benjamin Franklin, John Adams, and Thomas Jefferson, all of whom lived in Paris in the decade preceding 1789, agreed that a revolution was far more likely in England than in France. Franklin, who returned to the United States in 1783, considered France the most stable power in Europe. It is true that by May 1788 Jefferson, at that time United States minister to France, thought that "a revolution in their constitution seems inevitable, unless foreign war supervene to suspend the present crisis"; but in August he could assure James Monroe that "this country will, within two or three years, be in the enjoyment of a tolerably free constitution, and that without it's having cost them a drop of blood. For none has yet been spilt, tho' the English papers have set the whole nation to cutting throats." On June 29, 1789, fifteen days before the storming of the Bastille, he wrote John Jay that "this great crisis being now over, I shall not have matter interesting enough to trouble you with as often as I have done lately."<sup>17</sup> I should stress that Thomas Paine, Gouverneur Morris, Joel Barlow, and Monroe, all of whom witnessed the Revolution at various stages, were no more prescient than Jefferson in predicting the course and outcome of events.

America's own revolution, with its accompanying religious millennialism, prepared Americans of different social strata to express continuing jubilation over what Robert Darnton identifies as the central message of the French Revolution—"the sense of boundless possibility. . . . Possibilism against the givenness of things. . . . A conviction that the human condition is malleable, not fixed, and that ordinary people can make history instead of suffering it." It was that euphoric discovery, the discovery that even the glacial kingdoms of Europe could crack and quickly melt away, that led American mechanics, tradesmen, sailors, lawyers, shopkeepers, merchants, manufacturers, farmers, and laborers to don red cockades and sing "Ca Ira!" and the "Marseillaise"; to drink endless toasts to the Rights of Man, the French Republic, and its armies battling the forces of despotism; to gather by the thousands at Philadelphia's harbor to cheer the French warship *L'Embuscade* as it towed in captured vessels with the British colors reversed and humbled below the French Republic's flag.<sup>18</sup> In Boston and other cities francophiles addressed one another as "citizen" or "citess" in the case of women, the latter being a symbolic gesture toward equality that stopped short of identical rights. Disdaining all titles of distinction,

<sup>17</sup> Handler, *America and Europe in the Thought of Adams*, 73–75; Jefferson to John Jay, May 23, 1788 in *Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, ed. Boyd, XIII, 190; Jefferson to James Monroe, Aug. 9, 1788, *ibid.*, 489; Jefferson to Jay, June 29, 1789, *ibid.*, XV, 223.

<sup>18</sup> Darnton, "What Was Revolutionary about the French Revolution?" 10; Hazen, *Contemporary American Opinion of the French Revolution*, 164–88; Link, *Democratic-Republican Societies*, 44–99, 114–16; Harry Ammon, *The Genet Mission* (New York, 1973), 51–56; Young, *Democratic Republicans*, 351–75; Stewart, *Opposition Press of the Federalist Period*, 117–41.



Republican enthusiasts toasted their fellow "Citizen George Washington." New York's Crown Street became Liberty Street; with due ceremony Bostonians transformed Royal Exchange Alley into Equality Lane and took up collections to free prisoners in the city jail. As Philadelphia's women prepared to greet the charismatic Citizen Edmond Charles Genet, they decorated their hair, like flower children, with patriotic ribands. Even thirty years later Attorney General William Wirt could write, sounding like an aging veteran of the 1960s: "My breast swells, my temples throb, and I find myself catching my breath when I recall the ecstasy with which I used to join in that glorious apostrophe to Liberty in the Marseilles [sic] Hymn. . . . And then the glorious, magnificent triumphs of the arms of France, so every way worthy of her cause! O, how we used to hang over them, to devour them, to weep and to sing, and pray over these more than human exertions and victories!"<sup>19</sup>

Such zeal for new possibilities could also be divisive, at least by 1793. Conservative Americans remembered that an overheard pro-English remark on the street could provoke a brawl. At Tontine's, New York City's elegant coffeehouse, hundreds of Republicans gathered in the spring of 1793 to intimidate the Federalist patrons and make them join toasts to a liberty cap on the bar. The harshest critics of the French Revolution tended to be resident Englishmen, such as the journalist William Cobbett. But when the English millennialist Charles Crawford wrote a comparatively mild anti-Jacobin treatise in 1793, he attracted no followers from the American prophetic community. Virginia's Episcopal Bishop James Madison voiced the more typical theme in 1795 when he credited God for the "great and glorious revolution" that had spread from America to France, confirming Isaiah's prophecy that tyrants "shall be chased as the chaff of the mountain before the wind." At Republican banquets radicals drank toasts to a different Mountain, the one led by Georges-Jacques Danton and Maximilien Robespierre, hoping to see tyranny "chained at its foot and may the light of liberty from its summit cheer and illuminate the whole world."<sup>20</sup>

For a time, enthusiasm for the French Revolution appeared to offer ways of promoting harmony at home or at least of concealing divisions within American society. In 1789 and 1790 virtually all of America's leaders had felt a need for national unity following the contentious debates over constitutional ratification and the inauguration of the new Federalist government. Even Adams, for all his pessimism concerning obstacles to freedom in the Old World, had agreed with Franklin, Paine, and Jefferson that America's "cause is the cause of all mankind" and that America's revolutionary patriots had fought for Europe's liberty while defending their own.<sup>21</sup> For most Americans other than Adams and Hamilton, the revolutionary

<sup>19</sup> Hazen, *Contemporary American Opinion of the French Revolution*, 169, 175, 214, 216; Stewart, *Opposition Press of the Federalist Period*, 117–18; Young, *Democratic Republicans*, 363–64. For William Wirt's memories, see Hazen, *Contemporary American Opinion of the French Revolution*, 299.

<sup>20</sup> Young, *Democratic Republicans*, 351–52; Bloch, *Visionary Republic*, 155, 159; Hazen, *Contemporary American Opinion of the French Revolution*, 187.

<sup>21</sup> Handler, *America and Europe in the Thought of Adams*, 102. In 1792 Hamilton wrote, "I desire above all things to see the equality of political rights, exclusive of all hereditary distinction, firmly established by a practical demonstration of its being consistent with the order and happiness of society." Morris, ed., *Alexander Hamilton*, 124.

events of 1789 and 1790 proved that America's example had "kindled a flame" in France that would eventually liberate the world from monarchic and feudal despotism. Since journalists and local politicians soon discovered that the French Revolution was immensely popular among "leather apron men" and other groups who had struggled unsuccessfully for more egalitarian reforms, leaders of various kinds demonstrated their own egalitarian and republican spirit by organizing parades and banquets and joining in toasts to the "brave Gallicans." In other words, francophilia seemed for a time to be a safe and even providential means for representatives of some elites to show they were not really an elite but men of the people, a game Americans have been playing with themselves ever since. In the early 1790s few Americans could predict that this appeal for ideological unity would soon produce the most bitter division in early national history.

Knowledge of that internal partisan warfare, which was exacerbated by disputes over foreign policy, has obscured the deeper joy Americans shared when they believed that republicanism was beginning to spread through the world. Like Alexis de Tocqueville, R. R. Palmer and a few other historians have perceived the French Revolution as part of a larger movement that leapt beyond national boundaries, rousing hope and struggle from the Netherlands to Naples and from Poland to England, where the Revolution Society and London Corresponding Society provided early models for Americans.<sup>22</sup> Most Americans initially shared that perception and were extremely reluctant to abandon it. The news that republican principles were exportable ended Americans' sense of isolation and helped legitimate the lawless, indeed treasonable, cause that the Declaration of Independence had sought to defend. By 1792 it appeared that the declaration's appeal to "the opinions of mankind" had not been in vain, that the United States would begin to gather republican allies instead of facing a contemptuous and hostile world.

In the United States, as in France itself, the Republican movement was nourished by a great diversity of local interests that cut across class lines. The Livingstons, Clintons, and other rich landlords and speculators of the Hudson Valley were as fervent in their support of the French Revolution as were the scientists and intellectuals in Philadelphia, the manufacturers who presided over the Democratic Society of the City of New York, the westerners who rebelled against excise taxes, and the artisans and slaveholding planters of Charleston, who were the first Americans to adulate the French Convention's minister to the United States, Genet. Such groups had quite different agendas, and the ardor of the South Carolinians, for example, cooled as Jacobinism became associated with slave emancipation and slave revolt. Many westerners, including the society of French *sans culottes* in St. Louis who in 1798 gave refuge to George Rogers Clark, then a brigadier-general in the army of the French Republic, were attracted to Genet's goal of "liberating" Louisiana from Spain

<sup>22</sup> R. R. Palmer, *The Age of the Democratic Revolution: A Political History of Europe and America, 1760-1800: The Challenge* (Princeton, 1959); Palmer, *Age of the Democratic Revolution: The Struggle*; Alexis de Tocqueville, *"The European Revolution" and Correspondence with Gobineau*, ed. John Lukacs (Gloucester, 1968); Alexis de Tocqueville, *The Old Regime and the Revolution*, trans. Stuart Gilbert (New York, 1956); Seymour Drescher, "Tocqueville and the French Revolution," *The World and I*, 2 (Sept. 1987), 645-61.

and opening the Mississippi to American commerce.<sup>23</sup> The twine uniting various Republican interests was a common enmity toward "Anglomen" and their aristocratic pretensions, a fear that a counterrevolutionary victory in Europe would reduce the United States to an English vassal governed by Hamiltonian sycophants and conspirators.

That mind-set made it extremely difficult for Republican leaders to adjust to changing circumstances or to voice doubts about France that would immediately be exploited by their Federalist enemies. Jefferson, for example, was initially jubilant over the public's infatuation with Genet and exclaimed in May 1793 that "all the old spirit of 1776 is rekindling." As secretary of state, Jefferson not only misjudged Genet's headstrong character but misled the thirty-year-old French minister by revealing his own views of the secret struggle within President Washington's cabinet. Insensitive to American political realities, Genet disregarded Jefferson's cautions and assumed that he could count on Jefferson's support when he challenged Washington's interpretation of neutrality and demanded a special session of Congress to overrule the president. In private letters to Monroe and Madison, Jefferson now expressed despair over France's "calamitous" appointment of a "hot headed . . . passionate, disrespectful" minister who would "*sink the republican* interest if they do *not abandon him*." As Jefferson and Madison privately bit their nails and waited for the French to respond to a secret request for Genet's recall, the French minister's arrogant conduct strengthened Hamilton's hand and coincided with news of the Jacobins' triumph, the French seizure of American ships, and the execution of the queen and Girondin leaders. Among the Republicans, however, the public meetings condemning Genet's insults to Washington and violations of American neutrality simply heightened fears of creeping monarchism. In May 1794, a year after Jefferson had admonished Genet to respect the sovereign rights of the United States, the Democratic Society of the City of New York proclaimed that "he who is an enemy to the French revolution cannot be a firm republican; and therefore, though he may be a good citizen in other respects, ought not to be intrusted with the guidance of any part of the machine of government."<sup>24</sup> One's faith in the French Revolution, in other words, was the litmus test that would reveal either ideological purity or the taint of antirepublican corruption.

This objectification of evil as a force subverting liberty leads us back to America's anomalous alliance with its former archenemy, the despotic and popish Antichrist of the French and Indian Wars. The lineaments of the Great American Enemy, the satanic enemy of free institutions, took form in the religious wars of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England when English Protestants first pictured themselves as

<sup>23</sup> Young, *Democratic Republicans*, 54–58, 248, 349–50, 371–75; Goodman, *Democratic-Republicans of Massachusetts*, 47–127; Banning, *Jeffersonian Persuasion*, 208–14, 226–45; Link, *Democratic-Republican Societies*, 71–99; Thomas P. Slaughter, *The Whiskey Rebellion: Frontier Epilogue to the American Revolution* (New York, 1986), 127–42; Hyslop, "American Press Reports of the French Revolution," 337, 32, 246; Palmer, *Age of the Democratic Revolution: The Challenge*, 6.

<sup>24</sup> Ammon, *Genet Mission*, 50–54, 58–79, 96–119, 133–46; Albert Hall Bowman, *The Struggle for Neutrality: Franco-American Diplomacy during the Federalist Era* (Knoxville, 1974), 76–97; Hazen, *Contemporary American Opinion of the French Revolution*, 184–85, 200; Young, *Democratic Republicans*, 415.

the Chosen People commissioned by God to outflank the Counter-Reformation by establishing expansive colonies in Ireland, North America, and the Caribbean.<sup>25</sup>

The enemy, whether Spanish or French, was capable of any crime in the service of his despotic king and church, since despotism by some curious alchemy created disciplined zealots who gave no thought to moral guilt or death. Most insidious, perhaps, were the satanic plots to incite black slaves to revolt and to lead Indian savages in attacks on the frontiers of Christian civilization. By the time of the French and Indian Wars, two or three generations of Huguenot refugees scattered from Charleston to Boston had augmented the image of France as the Antichrist and Whore of Babylon, the empire of evil whose overthrow would signal the coming millennium. Despite the cosmopolitan appeal of French manners and culture, it would be difficult to exaggerate the importance of the French and Indian Wars in providing the English colonists with a sense of apocalyptic peril and a common symbolism of religious perversion and political tyranny.<sup>26</sup>

Beginning in 1778, however, the United States had become an ally of that same Bourbon Antichrist—or as Franklin put it in a letter to his English friend David Hartley, America had been “*forc’d and driven* into the Arms of France. She was a dutiful and virtuous Daughter. A cruel Mother-in-Law turn’d her out of Doors, defamed her, and sought her Life.” Once “honourably married” to France, America would “make as good and useful a Wife as she did a Daughter” to the wicked mother-in-law, who would soon regret her loss. For Franklin and other patriots, it was now England that stood revealed as the despotic and even popish Great American Enemy. All the same, many American Protestants must have been embarrassed to learn that after the victory at Yorktown, to which the French contributed more armed forces than the Americans, the armies of both nations attended a solemn high mass.<sup>27</sup> The Americans’ gratitude to France, even when coupled with the profound anglophobia generated by the Revolutionary War, could not disguise a sense of unease and guilt over being allied with a traditional foe and potent symbol of absolutist rule.

In consequence, the United States had a compelling ideological interest in seeing France transformed. Even an archconservative like Gouverneur Morris was shocked

<sup>25</sup> Michael McGiffert, “God’s Controversy with Jacobean England,” *American Historical Review*, 88 (Dec. 1983), 1151–74; Karen Ordahl Kupperman, “Errand to the Indies: Puritan Colonization from Providence Island through the Western Design,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, 45 (Jan. 1988), 70–99; Theodore Dwight Bozeman, “The Puritans’ ‘Errand into the Wilderness’ Reconsidered,” *New England Quarterly*, 59 (June 1986), 231–51.

<sup>26</sup> See esp. Bloch, *Visionary Republic*, 22–50, 160–61; Howard Mumford Jones, *America and French Culture, 1750–1848* (Chapel Hill, 1927), 500–530; David Brion Davis, ed., *The Fear of Conspiracy: Images of Un-American Subversion from the Revolution to the Present* (Ithaca, 1971), xiii–xxiv, 23–65; Sacvan Bercovitch, *The American Jeremiad* (Madison, 1978), 117–21; Ernest Lee Tuveson, *Redeemer Nation: The Idea of America’s Millennial Role* (Chicago, 1968); Nathan O. Hatch, “The Origins of Civil Millennialism in America: New England Clergymen, War with France, and the Revolution,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, 31 (July, 1974), 417; Nathan O. Hatch, *The Sacred Cause of Liberty: Republican Thought and the Millennium in Revolutionary New England* (New Haven, 1977); James West Davidson, *The Logic of Millennial Thought: Eighteenth-Century New England* (New Haven, 1977).

<sup>27</sup> Benjamin Franklin to David Hartley, Feb. 12, 1778, in *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin*, ed. William B. Willcox et al. (27 vols., New Haven, 1959–), XXV, 651; Henry F. May, *The Enlightenment in America* (New York, 1976), 116.



Portrait of the Marquis de Lafayette by Samuel F. B. Morse, 1826,  
on the south wall of the New York Council Chamber, City Hall.  
*Courtesy Collection of the City of New York.*

by what he termed the depravity and extreme rottenness of the Old Regime. Paris, he wrote in 1789, "is perhaps as wicked a spot as exists." As late as December 1792, though alarmed by the radical turns and twists of the Revolution, Morris could express his love for the French people and write that he considered "the establishment of a good constitution here as a principal means, under Divine Providence, of extending the blessings of freedom to the many millions of my fellow-men who groan in bondage on the Continent of Europe."<sup>28</sup>

The ideological desire to reform and liberalize America's principal ally, in conformity with America's Protestant and republican image, was closely related to what William Gass has called "sacred secularities."<sup>29</sup> Partly because religious history, as if conforming to the separation of church and state, has long been segregated from political history, only a few historians have recognized the religious connotations contained in the very idea of revolution. Yet the seventeenth-century English "Revolution of the Saints" was by no means the last movement to overturn a reigning theodicy and thereby redefine the sources of evil and the historical limits of human perfection. To most Anglo-American whigs, the less radical and therefore Glorious Revolution of 1688 suggested the equilibrium and compromise of a mixed government that allowed the maximum degree of liberty compatible with human passions and the need for order. But the words "glorious" and "revolution" took on cosmic implications in 1756 when Samuel Davies, the Presbyterian leader of the Great Awakening in Virginia, predicted a decisive military victory over the French Catholic Antichrist: "However bloody and desolating this last conflict may be," Davies preached, "it will bring about the most glorious and happy revolution that ever was in the world."<sup>30</sup> Davies was referring to nothing less than the millennium. When the wars with France induced leading revivalists to speak of "glorious" or "extraordinary" revolutions being close at hand, the secular realm of political and military power teetered on the brink of the apocalypse. And if the world was actually approaching the threshold of sacred time and final solutions, a concern with traditional limits, distinctions, and safeguards was irrelevant.

In the eighteenth century this millenarian side of American thought was not confined to a lunatic fringe or to what much later generations would term fundamentalists. Biblical prophecy and eschatology were taken seriously by such representatives of the American Enlightenment as Charles Chauncy, Jonathan Mayhew, Ezra Stiles, and Benjamin Rush; by Baptists, Universalists, and a few Episcopalians as well as by Congregationalists and Presbyterians. Joseph Priestley, the English chemist and radical Nonconformist minister who emigrated to the United States in 1794 to escape persecution for his sympathetic views of the French Revolution, had hailed the American Revolution as a harbinger of the millennium.<sup>31</sup>

Biblical prophecies, especially those in the Book of Daniel and in Revelation, had long provided a vocabulary for denouncing the pope, despotic kings, slavery, and

<sup>28</sup> Hazen, *Contemporary American Opinion of the French Revolution*, 62, 68–69.

<sup>29</sup> William Gass, "Johns," *New York Review of Books*, Feb. 2, 1989, p. 22.

<sup>30</sup> Bloch, *Visionary Republic*, 40.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 3–149; May, *Enlightenment in America*, 158.

other forms of worldly injustice. During the 1770s British cabinet ministers and George III became targets for the standard anti-Catholic rhetoric of Pope's Day; Thomas Paine's secular attack on "the royal brute of Great Britain" and on monarchy as "the popery of government" dovetailed with clerical allusions to the Two Beasts, Satan, and Antichrist. As predictions of cataclysmic judgment gradually gave way to visions of imminent victory and terrestrial paradise, Calvinists as well as theological liberals both talked of America's mission to lead the world toward a golden age of freedom and equality. In his *Observations on the Importance of the American Revolution* of 1784, the English Dissenter Richard Price foresaw an age when "the rich and poor, the haughty grandee and the creeping sycophant [would be] equally unknown."<sup>32</sup> Although such fervent optimism waned in the mid-1780s, millennialism provided a framework of expectancy that gave immediate meaning to the French Revolution.

For millennialists throughout the United States, the news from France cast doubt on the perpetuity of long-accepted privilege and inequality. In 1794 an anonymous "Hater of Tyrants" in South Carolina interpreted biblical prophecies in remarkably unbiblical language: a "universal fraternity" of "tolerance, liberty, and equality" would soon emerge from the French struggle with European despots. As late as 1800, an anonymous "husbandman" in Troy, New York, discovered that the "seven thunders" heard in the Revelation of Saint John represented the republics that "have arisen up out of the ruins of papal and arbitrary government, and have for their basis that great principle of nature—All men are born equal and free."<sup>33</sup> Whether they heard the blast of the seventh angel's trumpet or saw the tree of liberty spreading its roots across Europe, millennialists and secular utopians shared a common hatred of luxury, haughty pride, and corruption as well as an impatience with compatriots who stood in the middle of the road.

In a careful study of book catalogs and lending libraries, Ruth Bloch has recently found that francophilic millennialist literature was widely distributed in the mid-1790s, particularly in mid-Atlantic and New England towns and cities. No less striking than the overlap of biblical and secular arguments is the prevalent conviction that French attacks on Christianity should be understood as a transitory stage on the path to unadulterated Protestantism. As late as 1795 Jedidiah Morse, geographer, defender of Calvinist orthodoxy, and pastor of the First Congregational Church in Charlestown, Massachusetts, affirmed that France would eventually turn to Protestantism. Samuel Stillman, a Boston Baptist and Federalist, reassured Christians that France's revolutionary calendar would at least "obliterate . . . every idea of saints days, feasts and fasts, &c. which make a great part of the superstition of the Romish Church." The important point, millennialists insisted, was the lethal blow to Catholicism. By sweeping away the most dangerous corruptions of Chris-

<sup>32</sup> Bloch, *Visionary Republic*, 54–98, esp. 98.

<sup>33</sup> Rev. 10:4; Bloch, *Visionary Republic*, 156–59. Although David Osgood and other New England Federalist clergymen began attacking the French Revolution in the fall of 1794, well after the Thermidorean reaction of the preceding summer, Ruth Bloch maintains that "only a few influential clergymen south of New England switched from francophilic millennialism in the middle of the decade to francophobic Federalism at the end." See *ibid.*, 157.

tianity, the French were preparing the way for the conversion of the Jews and the prophetic triumph of pure religion. It was hardly fortuitous, many millennialists noted, that the British showed their true colors by siding with the pope. In whatever light American Protestants might view Napoleon, his entry into the Vatican in 1798 seemed to mark the end of days for the Beast of Rome.<sup>34</sup>

Although Christian millennialists deplored the violence of the French Revolution, they thought they were witnesses to a fateful struggle between the children of light and the children of darkness, a struggle that had no place for the squeamish. Large numbers of American clergymen defended the French regicides and agreed essentially with Jefferson's statements that "we are not to expect to be translated from despotism to liberty, in a feather-bed," and that "the tree of liberty must be refreshed from time to time with the blood of patriots and tyrants. It is its natural manure." According to the western Baptist Morgan John Rhees, whose views on the point were shared by Yale's Congregationalist president Ezra Stiles, the "excesses" of the Terror would not prevent the French Revolution from spreading "the perfect law of liberty" through the entire world. In early 1793 Jefferson himself revealed an apocalyptic mentality in a famous letter rebuking his protégé William Short for criticizing the Jacobins. Sounding more like Thomas Münzer, the sixteenth-century radical Anabaptist, than like an eighteenth-century defender of inalienable rights, Jefferson asserted that

the liberty of the whole earth was depending on the issue of the contest, and was ever such a prize won with so little innocent blood? My own affections have been deeply wounded by some of the martyrs of this cause, but rather than it should have failed I would have seen half the earth desolated; were there but an Adam and an Eve left in every country, and left free, it would be better than as it now is.<sup>35</sup>

When Jefferson envisioned mass extermination as a possibly necessary means of reaching a postrevolutionary Eden, he raised a profound question regarding the relationship between violence and inequality. As most Americans knew, inequality had first appeared in the sibling rivalry between Adam and Eve's two sons. When Cain and Abel sought to win the Lord's favor by bringing him competitive offerings, God ignored Cain and rewarded Abel with special esteem. Outraged by this "incongruity between destiny and merit," to use Max Weber's definition of the problem of evil, Cain made matters worse for himself by killing his brother Abel. Apart from the narrative's implications regarding competing modes of production and ways of life (pastoral and agricultural), Cain's revolution introduced violence as a means of redress. Murder is the ultimate and irreversible demonstration of inequality, since

<sup>34</sup> Bloch, "Social and Political Base of Millennial Literature," 384–96; Nash, "American Clergy and the French Revolution," 393, 395–96; Bloch, *Visionary Republic*, 173, 168–70.

<sup>35</sup> Bloch, *Visionary Republic*, 162, 171–94; Jefferson to Lafayette, April 2, 1790, in *Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, ed. Boyd, XVI, 293; Jefferson to William Stephens Smith, Nov. 13, 1787, *ibid.*, XII, 356; Edmund S. Morgan, *The Gentle Puritan: A Life of Ezra Stiles, 1727–1795* (New Haven, 1962), 455–61; Jefferson to William Short, Jan. 3, 1793, in *The Life and Selected Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, ed. Adrienne Koch and William Peden (New York, 1944), 521–22.



it reduces a human being, a whole world of consciousness, to nonbeing.<sup>36</sup> Although revolutionaries have often exulted in bloodshed as therapy or sacrificial purification, that illusory cure for injustice has almost always metastasized and then perpetuated the very malignancy that radicals intended to root out. It is one thing to represent inequality as an interpersonal relationship—characterized either by servile subordination or by parading triumphantly with someone's head stuck on a pike, as Parisian revolutionaries did as early as 1789. It is quite a different matter to perceive inequality as a historical condition created, according to the account of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, when the first man enclosed a piece of land and said, "*This is mine.*" It is true, of course, that Rousseau traced institutionalized inequalities to interpersonal acts of fraud and plunder. Yet for Rousseau emancipation from such historical enslavement depended, not on counteracting efforts to plunder the plunderers, but on subjugating each individual to a transcendent and apolitical General Will.<sup>37</sup> Although relatively few Americans had read Rousseau, the French Revolution made them increasingly aware that attempts to right historical wrongs could easily lead to new forms of interpersonal tyranny. The problem of legitimating violence and inequality was especially poignant in a republican society based to a large extent on the labor of slaves.

Most literate Americans were familiar with biblical theodicies that explored the spiraling consequences of favoritism, jealousy, and dirty tricks, such as the story of the sale of young Joseph into slavery by his jealous brothers. For that act, Americans knew, the brothers were later humbled before Joseph's feet. The archetype of illegitimate inequality, Samuel Sewall had argued in 1700 in his antislavery tract, *The Selling of Joseph*, was the relationship between master and slave. In the United States the model was observable and close at hand. "As I would not be a *slave*," Abraham Lincoln wrote in the 1850s, "so I would not be a *master*. This expresses my idea of democracy. Whatever differs from this, to the extent of the difference, is no democracy."<sup>38</sup> Although Lincoln implied that the relationship between master and slave was the antipode of democratic equality, most Americans have been so accustomed to thinking of *freedom* as the antithesis of slavery that they have usually failed to see the elements of bondage in any nominally free relationship based on inequality. Indeed, the continuing liberal emphasis on abstract freedom long divert-

<sup>36</sup> See esp. Robert M. Cover, "Violence and the Word," *Yale Law Journal*, 95 (July 1986), 1601–29. Drawing on Elaine Scarry's analysis of pain, Cover observes that "the deliberate infliction of pain in order to destroy the victim's normative world and capacity to create shared realities we call torture . . . . The torturer and victim end up creating their own terrible 'world,' but this world derives its meaning from being imposed upon the ashes of another. The logic of that world is complete domination, though the objective may never be realized." Cover does not specifically point to the connection between domination and inequality. For Max Weber's phrasing of the problem of evil (in his "Social Psychology of World Religions"), see Jon P. Gunnemann, *The Moral Meaning of Revolution* (New Haven, 1979), 30.

<sup>37</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract and Discourses*, trans. G. D. H. Cole (London, 1930), 5, 9–13, 215, 227–28.

<sup>38</sup> On Samuel Sewall's tract, see David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture* (1966; reprint, New York, 1988), 344–46. The manuscript containing Abraham Lincoln's undated definition of democracy is printed and discussed in Roy P. Basler, ed. *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln* (9 vols., New Brunswick, 1953–1955), II, 532.

ed attention from the bondage of such unequal relationships as traditional marriage and total dependency on wage-earning employment.

"The whole commerce between master and slave," as Jefferson described the most extreme form of inequality short of torture and death, "is a perpetual exercise of the most boisterous passions, the most unremitting despotism on the [one] part, and degrading submission on the other." As George Mason, another Virginia planter, wrote in 1774:

Practised in the Arts of Despotism and Cruelty, we become callous to the Dictates of Humanity, & all other finer feelings of the Soul. Taught to regard a part of our Species in the most abject & contemptible Degree below us, we lose that Idea of the Dignity of Man, which the Hand of Nature had implanted in us, for great & useful purposes. . . . Habituated from our Infancy to trample upon the Rights of human Nature, every generous, every liberal Sentiment, if not extinguished, is enfeebled in our Mind. And in such an infernal School are to be educated our future Legislators and Rulers.<sup>39</sup>

Mason's "infernal School" prevented even the enlightened legislators of his generation from taking effective action to eliminate slavery, despite Jefferson's apocalyptic prophecies, following the blacks' triumph in Saint-Domingue in 1798, about becoming "the murderers of our own children" or being forced, "after dreadful scenes and sufferings to release [the slaves] in their own way." Nevertheless, Landon Carter was probably not the only southern planter who had wondered, as soon as he read the Declaration of Independence, whether its commitment to equality and liberty meant that the slaves must be freed.<sup>40</sup>

Whatever embarrassment white colonists may have felt regarding their treatment of blacks, the declaration had affirmed their determination to prevent the British government from carrying out its tyrannical design to enslave *them*. As Bernard Bailyn demonstrated, their talk of being enslaved was not hyperbole or lurid rhetoric; it expressed a genuine fear of being subjected, in the words of one typical writer, to "the arbitrary will and pleasure of another." According to traditional Lockean doctrine, as soon as any man was deprived of his property without consent and compensation, he had no protection against slavelike dependence. Nourished on such ideology, Americans were quick to believe that they were being reduced, as Bailyn put it, to the political condition "characteristic of the lives of contemporary Frenchmen, Danes, and Swedes as well as of Turks, Russians, and Poles."<sup>41</sup>

The fear of enslavement helps to elucidate the Founding Fathers' understanding

<sup>39</sup> John Chester Miller, *The Wolf by the Ears: Thomas Jefferson and Slavery* (New York, 1977), 41.

<sup>40</sup> Jefferson to St. George Tucker, Aug. 28, 1797, in *The Federal Edition of the Works of Jefferson*, ed. Paul Leicester Ford (10 vols., New York, 1892-1899), VII, 167-69; Edmund S. Morgan, "Negrophobia," *New York Review of Books*, June 16, 1988, p. 27. By 1787 slavery had been outlawed in Vermont, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, and the Northwest Territory, and legislation had ensured its gradual extinction in Pennsylvania, Connecticut, and Rhode Island. David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution: 1775-1823* (Ithaca, 1975), 25-31, 86, 90, 313-15, 507-8.

<sup>41</sup> Bernard Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass., 1967), 232-46; Davis, *Problem of Slavery in Western Culture*, 273-84; John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government: A Critical Edition*, ed. Peter Laslett (Cambridge, Eng., 1960), 159, 207-302.

of equality, which by 1789 became a crucially important standard for interpreting foreign revolution. The leaders of the American Revolution did not believe that men were born with equal talents and endowments, or that governments should take from the rich and give to the poor, or even that all adult males should be entitled to vote or hold office. Despite sharp differences of opinion regarding black slavery, they did generally believe that since all people were equally human before their Creator—equal in moral responsibility and vulnerability to corruption and error—they were entitled to equal respect as human beings regardless of differences in talent, wealth, and achievement. Accordingly, it was wrong both ethically and politically to treat individuals either as infallible demigods endowed with unlimited power or as contemptible objects, the mere instruments of another's will. As Gov. George Clinton's backers asserted in New York's hotly contested election of 1789, while "the merit of no man is to be depreciated because he is rich," neither "are any to be despised because they are poor"; "we neither wish to see men of dangerous wealth or dependent poverty in office."<sup>42</sup>

The danger inherent in exalted rank, titled nobility, or even excessive wealth abutting grievous poverty lay in the almost irresistible delusions of superiority that, even if softened by paternalism and charity, tended to destroy what Mason termed "that Idea of the Dignity of Man" implanted in human nature "for great and useful purposes." The creation of a proletariat, of dependent masses who owned no property, who could be exploited, manipulated, and scorned as the *canaille*, to use Jefferson's contemptuous French term for the rabble, obviously led to the same fatal evil. In 1789 Jedidiah Morse expressed a widespread mythic ideal when he wrote that New Englanders were mostly frugal, independent farmers who had "no overgrown capital, in which to learn profligacy of manners."<sup>43</sup>

Until the late 1790s, the attacks on the luxury, self-indulgence, and social pretensions that had accompanied the drift toward aristocracy in the American colonies were coupled with demands for greater economic equality. As Edmund S. Morgan points out, when Connecticut reformers called for a moratorium on the payment of debts during the depression of the 1780s, opponents did not deny the desirability of fostering a greater equality of property but claimed that such a measure would not achieve the mutually desired goal. Yet as Gordon S. Wood has shrewdly observed, in revolutionary America "the simultaneous hunger for and hatred of social pretension and distinction could be agonizingly combined in the same persons." Wood and other historians have rightly emphasized the material or economic dimension to the revolutionary ideal of equality—the problematic belief, rooted in the widespread ownership of land and absence of feudal ranks and privilege, "that equality of opportunity would necessarily result in a rough equality of station." The great unacknowledged question was exemplified by Lincoln's complacent statement in 1856 that the American public had "always submitted patiently to whatever of inequality there seemed to be as a matter of actual necessity" while public politics

<sup>42</sup> Young, *Democratic Republicans*, 141.

<sup>43</sup> May, *Enlightenment in America*, 181–82.

made "a steady progress toward the practical equality of all men." Did the key qualifiers "necessity" and "practical" imply that the equality of some Americans, such as upwardly mobile white males, depended in some dialectical way on a comparison with an inferior Other? As Frantz Fanon once wrote:

The Negro is comparison. . . . Whenever he comes into contact with someone else, the question of value, of merit, arises. . . . The question is always whether he is less intelligent than I, blacker than I, less respectable than I. Every position of one's own, every effort at security, is based on relations of dependence, with the diminution of the other. It is the wreckage of what surrounds me that provides the foundation for my virility.<sup>44</sup>

Paradoxically, the degradation of one-fifth of the American population tended to reinforce the illusion of achievable white equality while also generating fears that social instability might ignite a racial cataclysm. Even the most ardent white egalitarians did not envision a multiracial millennium. Yet whites were not alone in interpreting foreign revolutions or the meaning of the Bible. Jesus had expressed an ancient millennialist ideal in his parable of the vineyard and its warning that "the last shall be first, and the first last." Before being tried and executed in 1831 for leading a slave revolt that killed some sixty whites, Nat Turner said that the Spirit had told him that "the time was fast approaching when the first should be last and the last should be first."<sup>45</sup> For many American whites in the early 1790s, that was the terrifying message brought by thousands of refugees from the once fabulously rich French colony of Saint-Domingue. There can be no doubt that this decidedly nonbourgeois revolution, symbolized in tales of white colonists being raped, impaled, and slaughtered by rebellious slaves, stiffened southern resistance to even cautious proposals for gradual emancipation.<sup>46</sup>

Nevertheless, when one considers that an armada of 137 French vessels transported Dominguan refugees to ports in the eastern United States soon after Edmond Genet arrived in Philadelphia, it is astonishing that the black Jacobins had so little effect on the white public's enthusiasm for revolution. Writers such as Abraham Bishop, a Yale classmate in the 1770s of Joel Barlow and Noah Webster,

<sup>44</sup> Edmund S. Morgan, *The Challenge of the American Revolution* (New York, 1976), 215–16; Wood, *Creation of the American Republic*, 70–75; Basler, ed., *Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, II, 385. For Frantz Fanon's statement, see Gunemann, *Moral Meaning of Revolution*, 72–73.

<sup>45</sup> Matt. 19:21–30, 20:1–16; "The Confessions of Nat Turner, the Leader of the Late Insurrection in Southampton, Va.," in *Nat Turner*, ed. Eric Foner (Englewood Cliffs, 1975), 45. When Thomas Gray, the white lawyer who transcribed Turner's "confession," asked whether the respondent now found himself mistaken, Turner replied, "Was not Christ crucified?" *Ibid.*

<sup>46</sup> Alfred N. Hunt, *Haiti's Influence on Antebellum America: Slumbering Volcano in the Caribbean* (Baton Rouge, 1988), 24–28, 37–83; Davis, *Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution*, 186–94, 329–42, 380, 431; Winthrop D. Jordan, *White over Black: American Attitudes toward the Negro, 1550–1812* (Chapel Hill, 1968), 375–402; David Patrick Geggus, "British Opinion and the Emergence of Haiti, 1791–1805," in *Slavery and British Society, 1776–1846*, ed. James Walvin (Baton Rouge, 1982), 137–40; David Patrick Geggus, "Haiti and the Abolitionists: Opinion, Propaganda, and International Politics in Britain and France, 1804–1838," in *Abolition and Its Aftermath: The Historical Context, 1790–1916*, ed. David Richardson (London, 1985), 113–17. During the first four years of the rebellion, some 12,000 slaves were taken from Saint-Domingue to the United States, according to David Patrick Geggus, *Slavery, War, and Revolution: The British Occupation of Saint-Domingue, 1793–1798* (Oxford, 1982), 305.

insisted that the Dominguan slaves were fighting for the same principles Americans had consecrated in their own revolution. Bishop mocked the hypocrisy his countrymen showed when they celebrated the bravery of American rebels who had killed Englishmen and then recoiled in horror when blacks asserted "those rights by the sword which it was impossible to secure by mild measures." Bishop remarked that the American revolutionaries who had taught the world to echo the cry, "*Liberty or Death!*" did not say "all *white* men are *free*, but *all men* are free." The same God who led the Americans to victory, Bishop wrote, "is teaching them, as he taught you, that freedom from the tyranny of men is to be had *only* at the price of blood."<sup>47</sup>

Abraham Bishop became a fervent Jeffersonian Republican. Theodore Dwight, a dedicated Federalist and brother of the ultraconservative Timothy Dwight, was as outspoken as Bishop in his support for the Dominguan black rebels. In the spring of 1794, as British troops fought to reimpose slavery in Saint-Domingue, Dwight took the uncompromising position that slaves had been illegally deprived of such "absolute rights" as personal security and personal liberty. Since they had been brought into New World societies by force and were not parties to the social compact, Dwight reasoned, they were not subject to any customs or laws "unless designed as a partial compensation for the injuries which they have suffered — injuries, for which all the wealth of man can never atone." For Dwight it followed that any law sanctioning defensive war would "justify slaves for every necessary act of defence, against the wicked, and unprovoked outrages, committed against their peace, freedom, and existence." Since the whites in France had not been released from the obligations of the social compact, Dwight had no tolerance for what he called that "profligate, and blood-thirsty junto" that had seized control of the French Revolution and "forced the infatuated republic to assassination and ruin." Yet he hoped that the events in Saint-Domingue would teach southerners that the scenes of bloody retribution described by the prophet Jeremiah were "the natural, and necessary consequences of slavery, in every country, where the slaves are more numerous than their masters." It was up to southern slaveholders to begin eradicating an evil that would otherwise destroy them.<sup>48</sup>

While the Haitian example inspired a number of slave conspiracies and revolts, it had a deeper and more lasting impact on the self-image and nascent national identity of free blacks, especially in the northern United States. What impressed

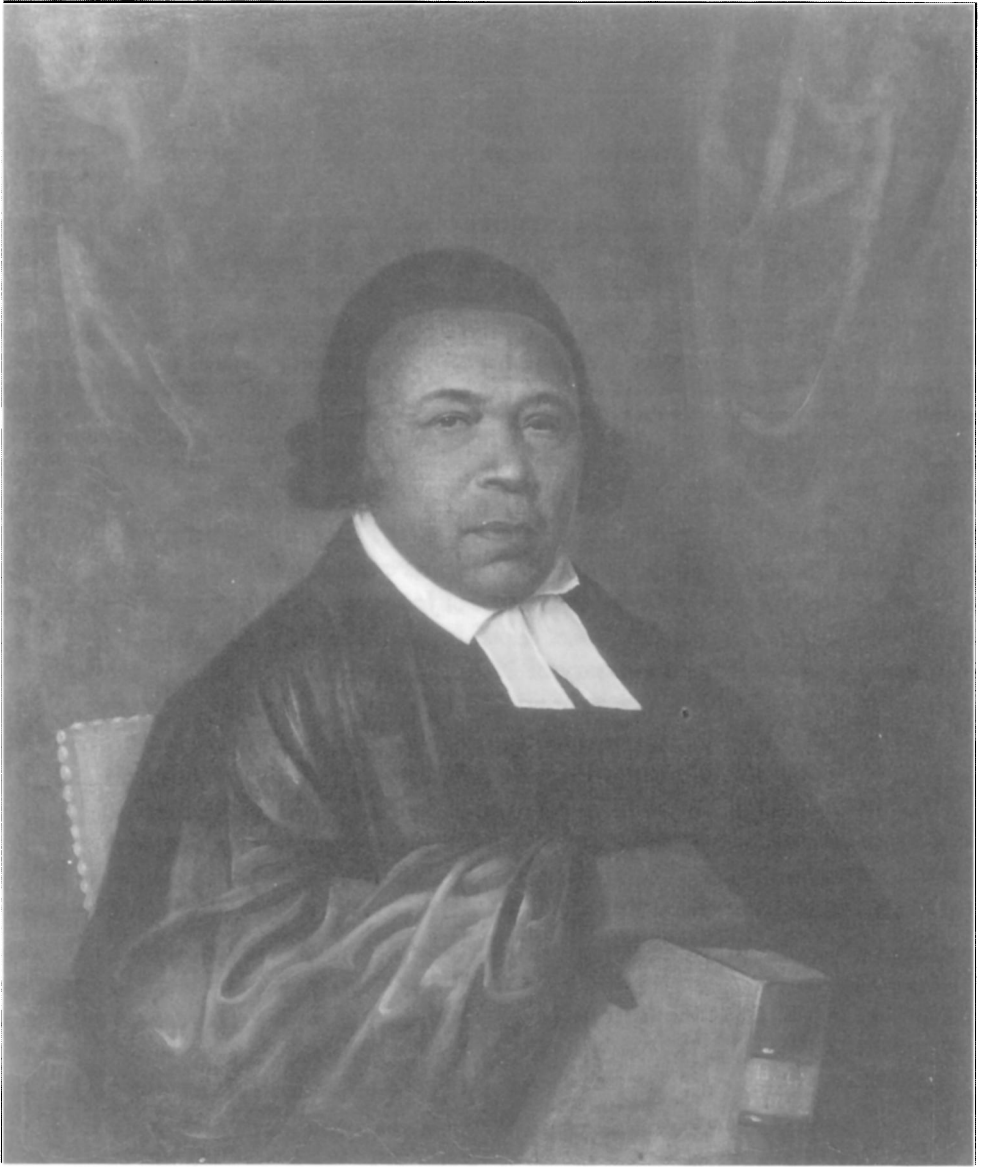
<sup>47</sup> For Abraham Bishop's text, see Tim Matthewson, "Abraham Bishop, 'The Rights of Black Men,' and the American Reaction to the Haitian Revolution," *Journal of Negro History*, 67 (Summer 1982), 148–53. See also Davis, *Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution*, 326–28.

<sup>48</sup> Theodore Dwight, *An Oration, Spoken before "The Connecticut Society, for the Promotion of Freedom and the Relief of Persons Unlawfully Holden in Bondage"* (Hartford, 1794), 10–12, 12–13, 16–21. Theodore Dwight quoted the prophecy from Jer. 34:17–20. By the late 1790s, when his older brother Timothy was president of Yale and leading the crusade in Connecticut against radicalism and religious infidelity, Theodore, according to Leon Howard, "described a Jacobin as a bloodthirsty villain who would find his greatest delight in murdering his mother." Theodore later served as secretary of the secessionist Hartford Convention. Leon Howard, *The Connecticut Wits* (Chicago, 1943), 351, 391. For James Madison, who always condemned slavery in principle and who considered the institution a "blot" or "stain" that "significantly impaired," in Drew R. McCoy's words, "the moral force of America's republican example in the rest of the world," it was not coincidental that the loudest attacks against republican slaveholders came from extreme conservatives and monarchists. Drew R. McCoy, *The Last of the Fathers: James Madison and the Republican Legacy* (New York, 1989), 260–64.

black leaders like James Forten, a prosperous sailmaker and entrepreneur in Philadelphia, was not the violence, which could be attributed to war and to slavery itself. It was rather the providential message that the black people "would become a great nation" and "could not always be detained in their present bondage." As early as 1794, when the blacks of Saint-Domingue were still struggling for their freedom, Absalom Jones and Richard Allen, Philadelphia's first two black ministers, cautiously urged slaveholders to learn from the Caribbean revolt that "great uneasiness and not contentment, is the inhabitant of [the] hearts of the slaves." The two black clergymen also warned that God might appoint leaders, "mean and contemptible" in the eyes of white masters, to avenge the slaves. In 1808 Jones, a former slave who had been ordained a priest in the African Episcopal Church, told his congregation that just as Jews had been commanded as part of their worship "never to forget their humble origin" and their historic deliverance from slavery, so American blacks should always acknowledge that an African slave was "our father or grandfather" and commemorate the abolition of the slave trade by the United States and Britain in order to remember "the history of the sufferings of our brethren, and of their deliverance" by the Lord, and to ensure that this experience would descend "to our children to the remotest generations." Most of Jones's audience were no doubt aware that January 1, 1808, the day Jones chose for thanksgiving and commemoration, also marked the fourth anniversary of Haitian independence. By the 1820s, when John Russwurm in a commencement address at Bowdoin College eulogized the Haitian patriots as the black equivalents of the Founding Fathers, and when blacks in various cities began celebrating the anniversary of Haitian independence, the revolution had become a symbolic negation of everything slavery represented. In 1829 David Walker, in his revolutionary *Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World*, urged his brethren to read the history of Haiti, which he termed "the glory of the blacks and terror of tyrants."<sup>49</sup>

These examples illustrate the extreme complexity of American responses to foreign revolutions. The nation's Founding Fathers had acknowledged the tension between

<sup>49</sup> Julie Winch, "The Leaders of Philadelphia's Black Community, 1787-1848" (Ph.D. diss., Bryn Mawr College, 1982), 12-13, 235; Julie Winch, *Philadelphia's Black Elite: Activism, Accommodation, and the Struggle for Autonomy, 1787-1848* (Philadelphia, 1988), 61, 72-73, 188; Absalom Jones, *Thanksgiving Sermon, Preached January 1, 1808, in St. Thomas's or the African Episcopal Church, Philadelphia: On Account of the Abolition of the African Slave Trade, on that Day, by the Congress of the United States* (Philadelphia, 1808), 10-13, 17, 19-20; Gary B. Nash, *Forging Freedom: The Formation of Philadelphia's Black Community, 1720-1840* (Cambridge, Mass., 1988), 189-90; Julius S. Scott, "Afro-American Slave Revolts in the 1790s," and Douglas R. Egerton, "Gabriel Conspiracy: Unsuccessful Coda to the American Revolution," papers presented at the session, "Decades of Unrest: Afro-American Resistance in the Age of Revolution," annual meeting of the Organization of American Historians, Reno, March 25, 1988; Julius S. Scott, "The Common Wind: Currents of Afro-American Communication in the Era of the Haitian Revolution" (kindly sent by the author to David Brion Davis, in Julius S. Scott's possession); Robert S. Starobin, ed., *Denmark Vesey: The Slave Conspiracy of 1822* (Englewood Cliffs, 1970); John Loftin, ed., *Vesey's Revolt: The Slave Plot That Lit a Fuse to Fort Sumter* (Kent, 1983); David Walker, *David Walker's Appeal, in Four Articles; Together with a Preamble, to the Coloured Citizens of the World, but in Particular, and Very Expressly, to Those of the United States of America*, ed. Charles M. Wiltse (New York, 1965), 20-21. Peter Hinks points to the influence of the Haitian Revolution on the continuing spirit of black unrest and rebellion in the coastal regions of North and South Carolina in which David Walker grew to manhood. Peter Hinks, "'We Must and Shall Be Free': David Walker, Evangelicalism, and Antebellum Black Resistance," draft, Ph.D. diss., Yale University, 1989 (in Peter Hinks's possession).



Absalom Jones, former slave and Episcopal priest, urged congregants to commemorate the Haitian Revolution. Portrait by Raphaele Peale.  
*Courtesy Delaware Art Museum, Wilmington.*

the goal of reducing inequalities and the social forces that tended to produce new or greater inequalities, including forces that were claimed to favor equality. One can picture the struggle for greater equality being enacted along a vertical axis running from kings, dictators, and tycoons who impersonate God down to the slave, prole-

tarian, prostitute, or political prisoner who is treated as a contemptible and disposable object. Intersecting this axis of power, respect, and degradation is a temporal line that extends from the Garden of Eden or Hobbesian state of nature toward a messianic age, millennium, or utopia. According to one classical and nonlinear view, we are trapped in the middle of this diagram on a cyclical Ferris wheel, destined periodically to rise toward greater freedom, equality, and virtue and then to fall toward corruption, anarchy, and enslavement to tyrants. We might mistake the uplift phase of the cycle for progressive movement along the horizontal, temporal axis, especially if our ideology screened out the oppressive costs of our seeming advance. By the same token, a period of seeming retrogression might be part of a spiral movement that actually leads toward the millennium, or in secular terms, toward a more just and egalitarian world.

Faith that history may actually lead to such a better world has been a potent stimulus to social criticism and improvement, an indispensable weapon against fear, complacency, and injustice. But the tension between millennial perfection and present reality requires constant readjustment or tuning. If the tension becomes too great, as on a cello, the bridge bends backward and the strings finally snap. This is the familiar situation when revolutionaries attempt to annihilate all present reality in the pursuit of a messianic ideal. Yet if the better world seems too remote or chimerical, or if apologists succeed in idealizing the present order, the cello strings slacken until complacent flat notes give way to silence.

Sometimes foreign revolutions have reinvigorated Americans' faith in a better world, expanding and redefining the meaning of equality and exposing the hollowness of our own pretensions to social justice. The fear of revolution has often been a spur to progressive reform. At other times, from the Federalist hysteria of the late 1790s to the great Red Scare of 1919–1920 and Cold War, foreign revolution has emerged from the shadows wearing all the satanic garb of the original Great American Enemy. As I have tried to suggest, Americans have made themselves especially vulnerable to this syndrome of "a god who fails" by interpreting world history in terms of their own messianic mission. When other revolutions fail to produce our form of democracy, we tend to conclude that we alone have the capability for safe liberation. Or, on the flip side, foreshadowed by Jefferson's own behavior, when former radical comrades become disillusioned by a reign of terror or a gulag archipelago, we dismiss them as apostates.

As we approach a new century, indeed a new millennium, we can never forget or justify the unprecedented horrors of the modern era, the tens of millions who have been slaughtered or enslaved as revolutionary zealots pursued final solutions and new world orders. But as Communist nations begin to reassess their own revolutionary past, nothing can be more disastrous than to proclaim that the cause of American corporate capitalism is now proven to be "the cause of all mankind," that Old World despotism is at last giving way to a modern version of Paine's "first ripe fruits of American principles transplanted abroad."

We no longer have time for self-righteousness, cynicism, or the pretense that we have played no part in the twentieth century's crimes. To speak in the prophetic



mode of my two predecessors, we are daily made aware of the industrial and technological marvels that have totally transformed the world of Jefferson and Robespierre, providing us with undreamed of comforts, health, conveniences, and knowledge as well as with the more equally shared peril of total annihilation. However one wishes to evaluate this stupendous change, as a historian of slavery and other forms of exploitation and dehumanization, I can only shudder when I think what our world would be like today if industrialization had advanced without political revolutions and the fear of revolutionaries, who for all their mistakes and self-delusions, perpetuated dreams of equality and social justice.